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DELIVERED JULY 24, 1849,

BEFORE THE

UNITED LITERARY SOCIETIES

OF

HAMILTON COLLEGE.

BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

ALBANY:
PRINTED BY CHARLES VAN BENTHUYSEN.

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ADDRESS.

In the selection of topics for these literary festivals, it seems to have been generally conceded that more honour is to be rendered to the graces of literature or the speculations of philosophy, than to the stern realities of life or the practical workings of society. The men whom you ask to serve you on these occasions, are not, for the most part, men of literary ease and leisure, who are devoted to the pursuits of learning and nothing else; but they have each some practical vocation; and it is not improbable that the very invitation you send them to come and preside at your annual jubilee, finds them in the midst of the writing of a sermon, or the framing of a plea, or the preparation for a political speech, or possibly the execution of some commercial enterprize. They read your letter, and the first emotion is kindly and sympathetic; they are pre-disposed to render to you as scholars, to the cause of learning in general, possibly to their own Alma mater, whatever aid they can; and if they

take counsel of their first impulses only, it is almost certain that you have secured their services. The sober second thought, however, is sometimes more embarrassing. They have been away from the groves of the Academy so long, that they are unwilling to return hither, even for a brief visit, lest both the muses and the graces should have forgotten them; lest the dust which they have gathered from their habitual contact with the world, or possibly the strongly marked shibboleth of their profession or occupation, should give them a foreign, if not a vulgar aspect, in these calm and honoured retreats. But the point once settled that they will accept your invitation, they feel themselves pledged to come up, so far as they can, to the spirit of the occasion, by surrendering themselves chiefly or entirely to the influence of literary,—certainly of intellectual associations; and if they do not plume themselves for a flight to the top of Parnassus, they at least go through the formality of seeming to drink at the fount of Helicon. Or if they disdain these restraints, they bring before you, perhaps some great theme of political or national bearing, and evolve from it principles which form the basis or enter into the frame work of the social fabric. All this is a legitimate use of the occasion; and some of these efforts have proved labours of love not more to the nation than to the world; not more to the cause of

learning than to the general cause of human improvement. But I fear you will think that I evince my respect for established usage in these matters rather by words than deeds; for instead of asking you to repose beneath the bowers of classical literature, or to enter the field of philosophical research, or to encounter any of the great problems of civil polity, I propose simply to spread before you some practical considerations in the contemplation and application of which, you will be likely to meet the demands which are made upon you by the spirit of the age.

The spirit of the age,—the spirit of *any* age,—what is it? We speak of it as familiarly as we use house-hold words; and yet when we come to analyze it, we are obliged to acknowledge that it is, to a great extent, a mysterious thing. Is there not an analogy between the character of an age and the constitution of man? As man is formed of body and spirit, so an age has its outward exhibitions, its visible movements,—if I may use the expression,—its material character; and besides this, it has a vital, spiritual mechanism,—an inward, living principle, of which all that is visible and palpable is only the external manifestation. The spirit of an age is a complicated thing; it is the embodiment of influences the most diverse and opposite,—in such a manner, however, as to render

its general impulses direct and simple. The spirit of an age is, to a great extent, hereditary; for though each successive generation has much to do in forming its own character, yet it does this under an entailed influence;—the good and the evil of other generations commingle in the habits of thought and feeling and action, which characterize our own. The spirit of an age is a thing of mighty power,—harder to resist than the spirit of the storm; and yet it is *moral* power, and therefore a legitimate subject for an intellectual and moral agency.

The ages past have had severally their peculiar characteristics; and as they lie embalmed in history, each seems to be giving forth its own lessons of instruction or admonition. Our own age, though it has had poured into it the influence of all the ages that have preceded, differs in some important respects from them all. I might instance several particulars; but I shall limit myself at present to one;—I mean its eminently practical tendencies. This is, to some extent, the result of the more general diffusion of knowledge; for whereas knowledge was formerly a sort of hermit on the earth, and scarcely breathed any other air than that of cloisters and monasteries, she has become transformed into a cosmopolite, and claims the wide world as her dwelling place. And whereas knowledge, during the period of her imprisonment, felt not the force of moral obligation, and

was satisfied to revel by herself in sublime and luxurious, and often dreamy speculations, since she has been allowed to come into the world, she has felt the kindlings of a diffusive spirit, and has entered, in no inconsiderable degree, into the vigorous activities which every where press upon us. I trust, therefore, that I shall not be considered wide of the occasion, if I occupy the time allotted to this exercise in bringing to your consideration some of the peculiar dangers, duties and helps of educated men, resulting from the practical tendencies of the age.

I can imagine that there may be some such thorough disciples of the utilitarian school, as to be well nigh startled at the suggestion that there should be any danger from that feature of the age to which I now refer; for they are accustomed to consider as concentrated at this point whatever of promise or hope there may be in respect to the future. But is there any thing so good as not to be liable to perversion? Have not facts proved that Christianity herself,—God's richest gift to man, is capable of being transformed into a minister of evil; that her authority has often been pleaded for the perpetration of deeds on which she has solemnly pronounced an abiding curse. Admit then that the thoroughly practical character of the age should be hailed as marking an epoch of jubilee in the history of the

race,—yet is there no reason why, like other good things, it should be guarded against abuse; especially why those upon whom its workings for good or evil chiefly depend, should gird themselves for a conflict with whatever might interfere with its healthful operation.

I say then, there is danger from the highly practical character of the age, that educated men will repress in some degree their own intellectual aspirations; will come short of those high attainments which it is alike their privilege and their duty to reach. We are to bear in mind that not only the original capacity for acquiring knowledge, but the knowledge which we actually acquire, is a talent which Heaven has intrusted to us for improvement and increase. The student who has completed his collegiate course, and gone forth into the world with his academic honours, is justly supposed to have become somewhat familiar with the several departments of science and literature; and withal to have gained a vigour and expansion of intellect that will render it easy for him to make still higher efforts and more enlarged acquisitions. Now it is due to himself, it is due to society, it is due to God, that he should faithfully improve not only the increased power of acting, but the increased power of thinking, which is hereby secured to him. His own immortal nature, destined as it is, to

illimitable progress, spurns at the idea of being stayed in its onward course, and claims its own inherent right to forget the things that are behind and press forward. The common good of the race, especially of the community in which he lives, forbids him to lay aside the character of a student; for in our day at least no man studies for himself alone; and it were as hopeless to attempt to keep bright thoughts from darting through the world, as it were to undertake to imprison the light of Heaven. And is it any thing more than a reasonable tribute to Him who constituted him with these noble faculties, and who has surrounded and still surrounds him with such ample means for their development and culture,—that the obvious design of his providence should be carried out in a consistent and harmonious intellectual growth? That student who has reached his full measure of attainment at the close of his collegiate course, who, from any cause which does not result immediately from the ordering of God's providence, suffers himself to feel that his mission as a scholar is accomplished,—I hesitate not to say is an offender against Heaven and earth. The measure of knowledge which he has already acquired, still remains with him as a talent; but in one sense at least, it is a talent hid in a napkin or buried in the earth.

Now just consider, for a moment, the circumstances in which the young scholar goes forth from academic scenes and engagements, to appear on the great arena of human society. Does he find himself amidst the reigning stillness of the twelfth century? Do the movements, or rather does the absolute stagnation, of the age invite him to seek an inglorious repose or to become a literary or philosophical or theological recluse? So far from it that whatever meets his eye seems endued with the power of perpetual motion. He finds that it is a working age upon which he has fallen,—an age that more easily gives a dispensation from thought than from action; and that, unless he is a working man, he must have at least an anomalous position in society. Casts he an eye towards the liberal professions? Labour, effective labour, is the law of each; each is a perpetual active ministration within its own appropriate sphere. And does he find the statesman to be little else than a man of leisure? He is perhaps the veriest slave of all; for his country which is his master, keeps him busy night and day. The whole world seems to have become satisfied that the great fabric of society has gone up wrong; and the whole world seems to be acting under a common impulse to endeavour to re-construct it.

Is it not obvious that such a state of things as

this, involves a powerful temptation to our educated young men to rest in superficial attainments and a very imperfect intellectual development? Is there not danger that, amidst all the multitudinous demands that are made upon them for active effort, the claims upon their reflective powers will be either wholly or partially overlooked? Is it not more than possible that, from being kept so constantly in contact with that which is gross and material, they will cease to put forth those efforts which are essential to all mental discipline and progress? Especially is there nothing to be feared from that intense devotion to mammon which seems to be the master passion, at least of our own country; which not only engrosses the faculties but debases them; which not only disinclines but disqualifies the mind to range into those higher fields of thought from which are gathered the choicest intellectual treasures? And would it be strange, if even they who mean to be vigorous and earnest students, should catch somewhat of the spirit of the outer world, and find their thoughts involuntarily sympathizing in the everlasting whirl of business around them? The answer to these questions is supplied by a large and convincing experience. We have on every side of us, both in and out of the liberal professions, men who, in the earlier stages of their career, gave promise of a rich and vigorous maturity;

and we flattered ourselves that, let their vocation in life be what it might, those fine faculties would never suffer from a stunted development. But it has come to pass that they who, as children, were men, as men are little more than children. In doing homage to the practical tendencies of the age, they have caught the fever of avarice, or else they have become delirious at the shrine of some political idol, or possibly they have plunged into the gulf of fanaticism to get baptized with the spirit of some doubtful reformation. Certainly they have done nothing for learning;—nothing to give them a name in the republic of letters or the world of intellect.

We cannot suitably estimate the evil of which I have here spoken, without considering it as the cause of *more extended* evil; in other words, without taking into view its bearings upon society. Let it be remembered that it rests with the educated men of a community to regulate its standard of taste and acquirement, and thus to exalt or depress its intellectual character. While the greater amount of the existing intelligence is centered in themselves, they exert a powerful influence to mould the minds of the mass; they have either a direct or indirect control of all the institutions of learning; they are looked up to by the young as model specimens in some or other of the departments of knowledge;

and thus they leave the impress of their own minds upon their generation, especially upon those who are rising up to occupy their places. If then these men upon whom it devolves to give character to society, and who may be regarded as the fountain of intellectual influence, obey the impulses of the spirit of the age to action, at the expense of coming to a dead pause in the career of improvement;—if their knowledge is contracted where it ought to be extensive, or superficial where it ought to be profound, or stationary where it ought to be advancing,—believe me, society may justly arraign them at her bar, on the charge of having carelessly or wantonly trifled with her best interests. She has a right to all that intellectual energy and elevation which the due culture of their faculties would have imparted to her; and what she has a right to receive, they surely have no right to withhold.

Allow me to advert here, for a moment, a little more particularly, to one effect of a low standard of mental culture,—I mean the prevalence of a superficial literature. The taste of any community or any period is at once formed and indicated by the character of the books which are most earnestly sought and most extensively read. Now the men who make our books generally belong to the class which we denominate educated men; and as the stream does not rise above the fountain, the book

will not rise above its author. If therefore the educated mind becomes a superficial mind,—if they who undertake to speak to us through the press are inadequate to this high office of furnishing public instruction or even public amusement,—what else have we to expect than that the press itself will become a mere Pandora's box,—that a flood of worthless books will be poured out upon us, and as a consequence, that our literature will swell into a dead sea of mere trash, if not of absolute corruption. For let it be remembered, a superficial literature has only to be left to itself to become a licentious literature; in the absence of that which is good, positive evil will inevitably obtrude itself; and what would otherwise be cast away as insipid or worthless, is rendered tolerable, even palatable, by a seasoning of vulgar or profane wit. And while the literature of the day has much to do in forming the public taste, the public taste in turn is not less efficient in controlling the literature; for books are written not to be given away, but to be sold; and if an author will find purchasers, he must give the people what they want. I am sure that I should do no injustice to the present age, or to our own country in particular, if I should hold it up to you as an example, even a fearful example, of the evil of which I am speaking. Our literature can indeed boast of some sparkling gems, which we are proud

to own, and the fame of which we expect will prove imperishable; but that a large proportion of the volumes that our presses are weekly turning off, of native as well as foreign production, are at least of questionable utility, let the light and romantic, not to say corrupt and profligate character, of too many of their readers, testify. I do not attribute this result altogether even to the more remote practical workings of the age; but just so far as this spirit has diminished the love of study, of earnest and profound thought, thereby generating a false taste, and ministering to it, it is made responsible, (and yet not justly so, for it is only by miserable perversion,) for a proportionable amount of intellectual and moral evil.

But if there is danger from the practical character of the age that our educated men will contract a habit of superficial thinking, and thus bring evil upon their generation and posterity, is there not danger also that some of them, from the natural tendency of the human mind, will rush to the opposite extreme, and instead of being sober students, will become mere speculative fanatics, and waste their lives amidst miserable vagaries which can never add a cubit to their intellectual stature. I think I have known cases of precisely this character,—individuals of originally fine powers, who have become deeply impressed with

the disproportionate amount of thought and of action in the community in which they have lived, or perhaps in the great intellectual world; and in the effort to escape the common evil, they have actually incurred a greater one;—have yielded to a spirit of reckless speculation, and have turned out profitless and mystical theories, as the unquestionable verities of a sound philosophy, or possibly of a sound theology; and then they have put the press in requisition to render their dreams, if possible, the common property of the world. No doubt this is sometimes the result of a peculiar constitution of mind predisposing to wild and startling speculations; but it admits not of question that in many cases at least, it is assisted not a little by the antagonist tendencies of the times. I venture to say that this spirit, so far as it prevails, is among the most adverse of all the signs of the age. It corrupts the public taste; it weakens the public faith; it acts like a canker upon the public weal. Better let men's minds contract a little rust from inaction, than attempt to polish them at the expense of giving them a wrong direction.

If I might be allowed to extend this train of remark to illustrate the danger from the workings of the practical spirit to the general cause of intellectual improvement, and of the public weal, I would say that this spirit has already done important

disservice to the cause of learning by attempting to exercise an undue sway in our public seminaries in making war upon the Latin and Greek classics. It professes to have discovered that these treasures of antiquity are little better than rubbish; that the ancients knew nothing on any subject but what the moderns know better; and it has shown itself more than willing to drive out of the temple of science all who deal in these worthless intellectual fabrics. I would not claim for the classics any undue or disproportionate importance, either as a matter of intellectual accomplishment or as a means of intellectual growth; nor is it any part of my intention on this occasion to attempt to adjust or to defend their relative claims; but I have no hesitation in expressing the opinion that every effort to send them into exile is nothing better than an assault upon the great interests of education. It is worthy of remark, however, that the most vigorous opposers of classical learning have generally had this for their apology,—that they have spoken out of the fulness or rather the emptiness of their ignorance; and where it has been otherwise, they have, as has been said of the lamented Grimké, actually demonstrated the value of such acquisitions by the eloquence and taste which they have brought to the ignoble work of disparaging them.

There is danger, moreover, that the practical spirit

of the age, by diminishing the taste for intellectual pursuits and depressing the standard of intellectual acquirement, will defeat its own legitimate operation. That there exists in connection with almost every department of society, a mass of machinery that is capable of working out important results, no one, with his eyes open, can question ; but this machinery, in order to accomplish its end, must be under the control of a virtuous intelligence. This becomes more and more necessary with the constantly increasing activities of the age ; for, as in the natural world, the explosion of a body is to be dreaded somewhat in proportion to the velocity with which it moves, so the moral movements of the age, accelerated as they are by a thousand influences unknown to preceding ages, require the most vigilant inspection, the most intelligent guidance. In centuries gone by, when the human mind was sitting in the region of the shadow of death, and the lights of learning existed only as "lamps in sepulchres," it was a wise provision of Providence that the all-pervading spirit was a spirit of inaction ; for the only way to render ignorance in any degree harmless, is to keep her quiet. But even in our own time, in the blazing light of this nineteenth century, have we not had painful illustrations of this truth in many of the efforts that have been made to reform abuses, or to mould

public opinion, or to modify the constitution of society. Has not many a favourite project come to naught, many a bold system of reform utterly exploded, because the self-preserving principle of an enlightened judgment was not in it? I do not complain of the rapidity with which every thing is moving around us;—of the earnest,—if you please,—the impetuous spirit that animates the great body of which we ourselves constitute a part; on the contrary, I recognize in all this, an Allwise mind, an Almighty hand; I think I see in it the germ of a better state of society, of a nobler type of human character, than the world has seen hitherto; but I am sure, after all, that it is to be regarded as a *conditional* prognostic of evil; for unless there be a high intellectual and moral influence to preside over this extended, complicated, never resting machinery, I know not what can save us from an explosion that will make a wreck of some of our best hopes, if it does not dash in pieces our entire social fabrick.

Having thus briefly contemplated some of the dangers incident to the practical character of the age, especially in reference to educated men, we will now glance at some of the corresponding duties which are devolved upon them. The peculiar obligations of any class grow out of their peculiar abilities, relations, circumstances. While there are

general duties that devolve upon all men alike, there are particular duties to which educated men are called in consideration of their superior advantages and the position they occupy in society.

I say then, they are bound to fall in with the spirit of the age, by cultivating and exhibiting a practical intellectual character.

The first and most obvious thing implied in this is, that they are not to grow weary in the cause of mental improvement. They must be scholars before they can be *practical* scholars; they must be intellectual men before they can be *practical* intellectual men; and when they reach the goal of academical honours, however respectable may be their measure of attainment, they should regard it as only a starting point in a new race of honourable acquisition. There are those who look upon this as a difficult, if not an absolutely hopeless matter, in consideration of the claims which meet them at every point for active service. But herein they greatly mistake. Let an individual come to consider it as a high moral duty that he should be always growing in knowledge, and let him form a distinct and resolute purpose that the stock of his acquisitions shall be constantly enlarging, though it be by the smallest degrees, and it will be a matter of surprise, even to himself, how easily, how delightfully, how effectually, this high resolve is carried

into execution. With his faculties always awake and the avenues for useful information always open, he will discover a thousand opportunities for improvement which another would allow to escape; he will not disdain the humblest contribution to his knowledge from the humblest man in society; nay, he will take lessons by night and by day, even from the objects of inanimate nature; for here especially are open to him some of the sublimest fields of science and philosophy. His profession may be an active and laborious one, insomuch that he is driven to make his nights short and his days long; but there belongs to his profession theory as well as practice, and his knowledge enlarges as his labour increases. Above all, he takes advantage of a systematic arrangement of his duties,—of an economical distribution of his time; he has his hours for business and his hours for study; and though he is always occupied, he is never in a hurry. It is in vain to say that this representation is merely imaginary; for there are examples, many examples, both among the dead and the living to illustrate its practicability. The individuals who, at this moment, hold the most commanding eminence in our own country, in several of the higher departments of learning, have prosecuted their researches and made their attainments in connection with an earnest devotion to the duties of some one or other of the liberal professions.

But if an indefinite growth in knowledge be obligatory upon our scholars, not less essential is it that their knowledge should be turned to the most practical account; and *that* as it respects both themselves and others.

It is quite possible for an individual to make considerable, even extensive, attainments in learning, and yet be far from having a sound intellectual constitution. As the food which you receive does no good to your bodily system, unless it be subjected to the ordinary process of digestion and assimilation, by which its nutritive energy becomes diffused, so neither do any mental acquisitions accomplish their legitimate end, unless by a corresponding process they are taken up and carried through the whole intellectual system. Do we not sometimes see scholars whose minds are the merest ware-houses,—in which there is indeed a vast amount of material, but not the least trace of order in the disposition of it. If they are to be measured by their *attainments*, they are giants; if by their *available* attainments, they are pigmies. Their knowledge, instead of invigorating their faculties, hangs as a dead weight upon them; and though the mere process of acquiring may grow easier, the general tone of the mind is in no wise improved. Now in opposition to this miscellaneous and inefficient mode of study, I would exhort every scholar, no matter whether

out of college or in it, to regard every new acquisition as having accomplished its purpose, only as it imparts to the mind a new degree of strength. Let his mind have within itself symmetrical compartments corresponding to the various branches of knowledge, and let each new deposit be made with scrupulous care; let it, by distinct and vigorous efforts, act upon its own accumulated stores, extracting from them the elements of life and power; and it cannot be long before, under such a course of discipline, it will have reached a high and honourable maturity. Its growth is not stinted for the want of earnest thought on the one hand, or of practical application on the other; and you almost forget how much the man knows in your admiration of what he is. I imagine there are few finer examples of this than the late President Dwight of Yale College. It was difficult to enter a field of knowledge where he was not sufficiently at home to be your guide; and his knowledge on every subject was so much at his command, that it was not easier for him to breathe than to communicate it. But you really lost sight in a degree of the richness and variety of his acquisitions, in the surpassing majesty of the character into which these acquisitions were so admirably moulded. The thought which I have here suggested to you is one upon which he used to dwell as embodying one of

the primary laws of human improvement; and I urge it upon you with the more alacrity, from finding it among my hallowed recollections of that truly eminent man.

But it is not more needful that the acquisitions of our educated men should be rendered practical in respect to themselves than in respect to others. No one has a right to live for himself alone. The humblest man you meet is bound to make some contribution in aid of the common good of society; and he upon whom have been lavished abundantly the means of improvement, is under obligation to render a proportionably higher service. If, for the advantages of his condition, he is indebted primarily to a gracious providence, and is therefore bound to render his first homage to the infinite Benefactor, yet he is indebted subordinately to society, and society has a right to expect, to require, that he should serve her with the powers which she has helped to develope. Do you ask in what way he can render his acquisitions subservient to the public weal? I answer, by making it the commanding purpose of his life to elevate the standard of thought, of feeling, of action in reference to whatever involves the interests of man in time or in eternity. It is not necessary, in order to secure this result, that he should belong to either of the liberal professions, or that he should mingle extensively in

the scenes of active life: he may stay at home in his study, and by his pen wield an influence that shall be felt and acknowledged to the ends of the earth. Whatever may be his relations to his fellow men, he is bound to see to it that they become in some way or other a channel of blessing; otherwise he offends against the authority which constituted these relations; he offends especially against the practical spirit of the age.

It belongs also to educated men to guard the age from those abuses to which its peculiarly practical character exposes it; to see that its impulses are healthful as well as vigorous; that its energies are brought into exercise under the influence of enlightened and virtuous principle. I have already alluded to the fact that things are done in the moral world now with more than telegraphic despatch. Great events burst upon us without waiting to be heralded by significant omens. Here and there and every where, there seems an unwonted combination of the elements; and the inquiry is, "Who shall ride in the whirlwind and direct the storm?" Who? *You* surely; you whose education has qualified you to occupy this responsible position; whose disciplined minds and high attainments constitute a tower of strength as well as a treasury of light and wisdom. Things will move rapidly without any aid from you; things will move rapidly,

notwithstanding all you can do to prevent it; but it depends chiefly upon you whether they shall have a right or a wrong direction. The world is full of empiricism and imposture; of reformers who need to be reformed, and of teachers who need to be taught; and it is no small part of your duty to test equivocal claims, to separate chaff from wheat, to fix beacon lights where they are needed. And then there is an influence of a different kind which it belongs to you to meet and control,—I mean the influence of a timid or sluggish or time-serving policy, which takes to itself the fine sounding name of conservatism. Not that I object to a *genuine* conservatism;—so far from this that I consider the best hopes of the age as, in a great measure, bound up in it; but the spirit to which I here refer differs from this, just as much as doing nothing and encouraging others to do nothing, differs from a course of earnest, but prudent and well directed action. You are not to be passive from the fear of doing wrong, but you are to be active and take care that you do right. You must not try to render things stationary from an apprehension of the evils that may possibly be incident to progress; but you must encourage their onward movement, only taking care to prevent an erratic precipitancy. In a word, you are to stand forth as the master spirits of society; and whatsoever your hand findeth to do in

exalting its character or improving its condition, you are to do it with your might.

The most grateful part of my subject is yet before me. We have seen that the practical character of the age brings with it dangers against which you are to guard; duties which you are bound to fulfil; but our view of it would be altogether defective, if it should not include also the encouragements, the helps, which it supplies to the faithful discharge of the obligations which it imposes on you.

I remark, then, that the prevailing practical and stirring spirit is fitted to exert an important influence through the medium of sympathy. It results from the very constitution of the mind that the mind takes its hue chiefly from the peculiar circumstances in which its faculties are developed. It sympathizes with the movements of the surrounding world: if they are sluggish, or if they are rapid, it will be likely to catch a portion of the same spirit. Or if, in particular cases, it assumes a highly contemplative character, and as a consequence, makes extensive acquisitions, when the world is in a state of indolent repose or even absolute stagnation, as in the period of the dark ages, my position is still illustrated in the fact that it never wakes to move the outer world; it may have great and godlike conceptions, but it has not the conception of reducing any thing to practice. Society breathes upon it no exciting

influence, and therefore cannot complain if it recognizes no obligation to stand forth in a new and practical attitude for her benefit. But how different, how opposite, is the state of things in which *your* lot is cast. If, in the constitution of the natural world, God has made activity the universal law, — so that the very earth on which you tread is never stationary for a moment, and the stars that look down upon you in their glory are performing ceaseless revolutions, — have not the movements of his providence in the practical workings of the age become accelerated into harmony with his ordinances in the kingdom of nature? Has it not come to pass that you must absolutely go out of the world, in order to get beyond the reach of perpetual human activity? Now I venture to say that if you were to pass your life merely as a *student*, your faculties would gather increased vigour, and your studies be prosecuted with greater success, from breathing the active spirit of the world without, and even from having the waves of an excited public opinion occasionally break over you. But as you are to be not merely a student, but a *practical* student, — as you are not only to acquire knowledge but to serve society by your acquisitions, you can hardly estimate too highly the importance of this feature in your condition. You are surrounded by influences that are fitted to keep your faculties in

working order. You breathe an atmosphere that can hardly fail to brace up the whole practical man. Even if you were disposed to ask a dispensation from intellectual toil, or to aspire to no higher character than that of an amateur student, you could not look out of your window without finding yourself rebuked, whatever part of the vast machinery of society might fall under your eye.

I may mention here also the influence of example; for there is a power in example which belongs to nothing else. The practical spirit has already been at work long enough to have achieved some signal triumphs; to have shown what it can accomplish in the formation of many illustrious characters which already brighten the page of the world's history. Here and there bright stars have arisen in our hemisphere, the splendours of which even the grave itself has been unable to quench; some of them have but recently appeared, while others have been shining through a succession of generations. Noble examples of learning, of wisdom, even of active usefulness, there were in earlier ages, before the practical spirit had begun extensively to diffuse itself; but these were exceptions from the general rule,—lights in the midst of darkness; whereas in our day, such examples are occurring on every side of us; and we are forbidden to doubt that intelligence and activity have already set out as twin sisters

to perform the circuit of the world. What a privilege to be able to contemplate such examples; to study the influences that made them great; to copy out into your own character their high and admirable qualities, and to hold them to your mind till they have exerted all their invigorating and elevating power. As each successive generation contributes its own share of names to this immortal list, so are ye more favoured than any of your predecessors, in having before your eyes a greater amount than they of embalmed practical greatness; in having a more extended record than they of worthies whose lives were a perpetual tribute of blessing to the race, and whose history is one exalted lesson of intelligence and virtue.

Recollect too that the educated men of our day have the advantage of entering into other men's labours. In our own country particularly, the wakeful and earnest spirit has been the ruling passion of at least the last two generations. It was thoroughly roused in the operation of those causes which brought on our revolution; and during the actual continuance of the tempest, though it operated in one direction only, yet it operated with mighty power. And when, after the storm of war, came the calm of peace,—when, after our name had been entered on the catalogue of independent nations, the discordant elements were to be reduced to

harmony and a new order of things to come up, here also the practical spirit found wide scope for its operations, and here it was especially that it became so vigorous and mature. On the basis of the great national institutions which it originated, the educated men of this generation are permitted to stand and carry forward their various enterprizes for the benefit of their country and the world. You can avail yourself not only of the spirit which they have diffused, of the example which they have set, but of the labours which they have performed. *Their* efforts have availed to render *yours* easier and more successful. *They* had to encounter the difficulty of inception, that *you* might enjoy a rapid and delightful progress.

The practical spirit secures the benefit of co-operation also. Only think what was the condition of a great mind making a great discovery, at a period removed from us only at the distance of a few centuries. You remember the case of the celebrated astronomer, Galileo. He ventured into the sublimest of all the fields of natural science; and the labours of his inquisitive mind were rewarded by a glimpse of certain great truths which had lain buried beneath the ignorance and rubbish of more than fifty centuries. But when he dared to speak of the discovery which he had made, the spirit of the age gave him the lie; the hospitalities

of a dungeon were forced upon him; and even his life would have been an offering to the reigning superstition, if he had had strength enough to hold out in the open vindication of his enlightened convictions. But let any great discovery in science or philosophy be made now, and there are fresh garlands brought forth to deck the honoured discoverer; there are multitudes engaged to test the accuracy of his observations and his results; and not a few are found entering the same field of research, with a view perhaps to push their inquiries to some remoter point;—at least to gather up the fragments of knowledge that nothing be lost. You may enter any department in the field of science or literature or active life, and your efforts will not fail for the want of co-operation: you will find it easy to associate with yourself others of kindred tastes and pursuits, and both you and they will work more vigorously and to better purpose, than if you were severally to prosecute your efforts independently of each other. Oh yes, there is a goodly,—I had almost said a universal, fellowship now established in the world of intellect; and this surely is to be reckoned among the richest triumphs of the practical spirit.

I must not omit to add that the prospects which the workings of this spirit have opened upon us, are of the most cheering import. Does our eye rest

upon our own beloved country? I dare not say that the elements of mighty evil are not in the midst of us; that there are not influences at work here from which the Ruler of the world must save us, else we perish. I dare not be confident that before the passing away even of this generation, there may not be witnessed among us portentous convulsions in which Liberty herself may seem ready to stretch her wings for her final flight. But if there be such a cloud resting upon our horizon, I look beyond it and behold a clear sky and a bright shining sun. I have no need to consult the wise men of the East or the West, in order to feel all the assurance I ask that Heaven has ordained for us as a nation an ultimate glorious destiny. Here Liberty has been cradled; here she has been trained; here she has lifted her golden sceptre; and here, as certainly as God's providence utters truth, shall be the scene of her brightest triumphs. Now let your eyes range over the nations, and take in the entire world. The paragraph that informs you of the revolution of an empire, scarcely detains your eye or your thoughts for a moment, because it details but an every day event. Change, progress, reform, liberty,—once hard and unmeaning words, now fall like music on the ear of the nations. The Omniscient alone measures the distance between the present and that point in the future, when the world shall have

struggled into liberty and into peace;—when to the inquiry that shall come up from millions of glad hearts,—“What meaneth all this glory?”—the answer shall be, “it is the glory of a social and civil, an intellectual and moral millennium.” But the day certainly shall come; for God by his providence as well as his word hath spoken it.

And what more powerful motives can be brought to bear upon the minds of educated men than this consideration suggests. You are not at work at an uncertainty, nor is your reward so far off but that it already looms up as a glorious thing. Not only is the exaltation of your country, the regeneration of the world, ordained in the councils of Heaven, but you have reached a point where incredulity herself can hardly doubt that there is a wonderful working together of things for the production of the coming glory. I was separated from you this morning by more than a hundred miles, but sometime before mid-day, I was safely landed in your beautiful valley. If, upon a sudden emergency, I should have occasion to converse with my family before I return to them, will I, think you, set myself doggedly to writing a letter, or will I not rather fly to the mysterious wires, which, though themselves never thinking, are yet ever surcharged with thought? When I ask for the latest news from Europe, I ask for what was done there ten or twelve days ago.

What is all this but the working of the practical spirit of the age? And what else does it indicate but that the day for keeping a jubilee in honour of the redemption of the nations, draweth nigh? Scholars, what will ye do to hasten the day? What more do ye require than this glorious prospect to bring all your energies into operation for the improvement of the race?

I know not where to look for a more impressive practical illustration of several of the leading thoughts which have now been presented to you, than is furnished by the extraordinary life and character of the late John Quincy Adams. The desire of knowledge manifested itself as the ruling passion of his earliest years; and it grew with his growth and strengthened with his strength. His opportunities for improvement from the time he left the cradle, were the best that the country, I may say, the world could afford; and he availed himself of them with most scrupulous fidelity. In due time he was a student at Harvard; in due time he was a graduate at Harvard; in due time he was a professor at Harvard; in short, he exhausted all the privileges and honours which that venerable university had to bestow; and each successive step in his course of study marked a greatly advanced stage in his career of improvement. When he had arrived at middle age, he was well nigh a prodigy for his acquisitions; and

yet he rested not from the labour of acquiring till he went to rest in his grave. He seemed to have surveyed every department of the wide domain of learning; and start whatever question you might, he had principles or facts or arguments at command wherewith to settle it. I remember to have had occasion once to make proof of his universal knowledge. I asked his opinion on a disputed point which would have seemed most remote from the ordinary range of thought which a great statesman might be expected to prescribe to himself; and he answered me as if he had been constituted an oracle on that particular subject; he not only gave me his opinion, but sustained it by reasons more luminous and decisive than I could have hoped to gather from almost any other source. And thus it was in relation to every subject. With powers of application that seemed never to require rest; with a habit of observation that was never interrupted and that scarcely knew a limit; with a memory open to receive every thing but to let nothing escape; his acquisitions became, I might almost say, the wonder of the age. I may safely assert that the man has not lived in our day who could claim a superiority in this respect to our venerable sage.

And yet this man was not *professionally* a student. A student indeed he was; but he studied with the cares of an entire nation pressing upon him; he

studied amidst the din and confusion of party strife; he studied on the top of the mountain wave, when he was guiding the vessel of state in dark nights and fierce storms. If books were not at his command, he studied without them. The material which he had collected grew under the action of his own mind, by a self-accumulating process; and whenever you met him, you always knew that he was wiser than when you parted from him, though the intervening period might have been ever so brief, and might have been spent in the very drudgery of a high public station. Is it not wonderful that such acquisitions should have been made in such circumstances; that he should have been at once one of the most vigorous students and hardest workers of his time!

Nor was his mind a mere depository of unavailable knowledge; on the contrary, he knew every thing so systematically that every thing was at his command; and more than that,—his faculties grew large and strong as well by the process of accumulating as by the treasures accumulated. Not a new thought entered his mind, but it entered it as means of nutrition, as an element of power. He had indeed great strength of passion, and sometimes he displayed it in even a humiliating degree, in connection with the strength of his intellect; but whether his mind was in a state of excitement or a

state of repose, every one felt that it was a mind of vast dimensions, and that it had received nothing that had not been rendered subservient to its growth.

Need I say that a mind cast in such a mould, trained under such influences, could not be satisfied to live for itself alone. While he was yet a stripling, his country put his services in requisition; and with the exception of the brief period in which she allowed him to go and breathe the air of his *alma mater*, and prepare some of his young countrymen to follow on in his own track of public usefulness, he was always among the most active as well as the most honoured of her servants. If you will take the American almanac, and look over the list of those who have successively occupied the highest stations of influence and honour within the nation's gift, you cannot fail to be struck with the fact that this bright name meets you every where; showing at once that he was adequate to every thing and that the nation had found it out. His mission was one of enlightened, lofty patriotism; and he seemed to covet no higher honour than to lay his great powers and acquirements at the nation's feet. But the statesman did not, after all, absorb the man. He loved to exercise his powers for the benefit or even the gratification of any of his race; and the last lines, I believe, that his hand ever penned were

written in the album of a lady who had asked him for such a memorial. The selfish spirit that spoils some great men, seemed to have gained no lodgment in his bosom. He was emphatically a labourer, and his field was the world.

Look at this great man now in his relation to the age that produced him. Had he lived a few centuries before, he might indeed have been born the same infant, but he never could have lived and died the same man. The God of nature might have given him the same faculties which he actually possessed; but the spirit of the age would, to a great extent, have crippled them; or if he had had glorious thoughts, he would have had them to himself, unless indeed he had recorded them for the benefit of some future and more practical age. But thanks to a gracious providence, before he was born, the spirit that is in man had begun to arouse itself to vigorous action. In our own country especially, were those premonitory heavings of society, which told that the good angel, Freedom, was about to light down among us; and the country's eye was looking and her heart throbbing, in expectation of this celestial guest, until she finally came in a shower of blood. Then was that boy baptized;—baptized at his country's altar;—baptized with the spirit of Patriotism;—baptized in the sacred name of Liberty; and his whole life

was a redemption of the pledge that he should live for his nation's honour. The practical spirit throbbed, as a principle of life, in his first pulsations; it watched, as a guardian angel, around his cradle; it moulded, as a mighty plastic influence, his great powers; it kept his heart full of courage and his hand nerved for action, till with his armour on, and in a great assemblage of illustrious compeers, he was stealthily met by that foe which gives quarter to no man, and which left him barely time enough faintly to articulate,—“The last of earth.” The great scholar, the great statesman, the great patriot, the great man, bowed his head then, for the first time, to an adversary. They laid him away among the illustrious dead; and it was long before his country could wipe away her tears; and even other nations chronicled his death as the death of a benefactor.

And right enough too;—for if he was indebted to the age for much of what he was, not less is the age indebted to him for much of what she is. His own country,—who shall record all the noble services he has rendered her? Time has been when he who should have essayed to exhibit him in his public relations, might have dipped his pen in gall; but that great peace maker, the grave, has intervened to suppress the risings of party spirit, and to throw into a better light actions that might

once have seemed of dubious import; insomuch that now you might almost trust the fiercest of his political opponents to write his epitaph. And it is scarcely too much to say that his influence has become an all-pervading element among the nations. While it operates directly in what they have heard and perhaps seen of his great wisdom and energy, it operates yet more extensively through the medium of international relations; for so intimately are the nations now connected with each other, that they share each others' influences, live in each others' pulsations, work out each others' destinies. I say, without the fear of contradiction, the spirit of John Quincy Adams, "the old man eloquent," the champion of liberty, the stern avenger of wrong, a very apostle of republican institutions, lives wherever civilized man lives; and it is for Him alone who knoweth all things to decide how far the great events that are giving character to our time, may be the continued movement of hidden springs which his mighty hand touched before it was left to moulder in the sepulchre.

I did not begin this train of remark upon our honoured countryman with any intention to pronounce his eulogy, but simply to show you by an illustrious example at what you ought to aim, and what you may accomplish as practical educa-

ted men. Nor do I undertake to say that any of you can reach the same measure of either usefulness or honour that God's providence meted out to him; for in his case, in addition to exalted natural powers, there was a combination of favouring circumstances which possibly may never exist again. But I say with the utmost confidence that any of you in this active period may be eminently useful; and his history is the voucher for it. Let the cultivation of your intellects then be a work for life. Let the ministering to the welfare of your country and your race be a work for life. Let integrity and virtue be reflected in all your conduct through life. Show yourselves in all respects worthy of this practical age, and endeavour to exalt it far above all its predecessors. Thus will your *alma mater* be proud to show your name on the list of her sons; society will reward your benefactions with her most valuable and enduring honours; and many an imperishable wreath may be laid upon your graves by the good and great of the generations that shall come after you.

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